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AUTHOR Gracie, William J., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

There is a serious lack of interest in and concern for the training of graduate students (TAs) who teach most of the sections of college composition. Setting up a teacher training program in English departments still dominated by literature specialists is not an easy task, but there are some ways to change the negative climate. First, the department as a whole must be made aware of the teaching job market. Second, if TAs are to secure any of the few positions available, their teaching competence must be virtually certified by their departments. Third, the training program should be a course recognized by the university for which a grade is received. Fourth, department chairs and divisional deans should be encouraged to foster research in composition within the department's own courses. Fifth, the department should be urged to invite a guest lecturer in composition to campus at least once a year. Sixth, a department competition should be created with a suitable award for the best graduate student teacher. A TA training course is offered at Miami University of Ohio. The week long workshop progresses from instruction in grammar and language structure, through composition techniques, a counseling session to eliminate the apprehension and fear of failure that new TAs experience, and an opportunity to grade freshman essays. The TAs at Miami University are also assigned to a departmental "mentor" and must attend a course in the historical, theoretical, and pedagogical aspects of rhetoric. (HTH)

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Serving Our Teaching Assistants and Our Profession: Teaching Graduate Students to Teach Composition

William J. Gracie, Jr.

Department of English

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

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Serving Our Teaching Assistants and Our Profession:
Teaching Graduate Students to Teach Composition

For the past several years annual meetings of the 4C's have been characterized by a crowded and diverse program, by an atmosphere of some festivity and self-confidence, and--a sure indication of an organization's success--by soaring room rates. In a word, the 4C's has arrived. The emergence of the 4C's from the academic wilderness is clearly reflected in the growth of research in composition and in the concomitant expansion of the organization itself. In fact, its growth is so remarkable that in a keynote address delivered in 1979, Wayne Booth observed that if the 4C's continues to grow there will be, in a few years, more members of the 4C's than people. While no one interested in language and literature will wish to denigrate the 4C's in its moment of hard-won success, I think there is a continuing weakness within the organization, and perhaps within the profession as well, that I would describe as a lack of interest in or concern for the training of graduate students who, in most departments, teach most sections of our composition courses. A quick survey of the 4C's programs since 1979 reveals that in the approximately 750 panels, workshops, addresses, and special interest group meetings in Minneapolis, Washington, Dallas, and--now--San Francisco, only eight were devoted to the subject of training graduate students to teach composition: that's two sessions per year attended by, at most, a hundred teachers. Our uninterest is both unfortunate and ironic; for as our understanding of the composing process and of composition pedagogy has grown incrementally, our ability to transmit that knowledge to our graduate students has been less than conspicuous. I am convinced that the considerable achievements in composition research made recently will be weakened if we do not devote as much attention to our graduate students as to the freshmen they teach.

But setting up a teacher training program in English departments still dominated by literature specialists is clearly not an easy task. The initiator of such a project--ususally an already battle-scarred director of Freshman English--must often combat a negative climate: that is, a kind of departmental complacence which seems, on one level, merely indifferent to such programs, and, on another level, seems convinced that the study of literature in itself can provide the new teaching assistant with all the knowledge needed to teach composition. Despite the growth of the 4C's, despite new research in composition, despite even the public's professed concern for the so-called literacy crisis, this negative climate still exists on many campuses. There are some ways, however, that that climate can be changed, and I will suggest a few before moving on to a discussion of my department's moderately successful attempt to improve its own negative climate.

First--and perhaps most dramatically--the deparment as a whole has to be made aware of the job market. According to Jasper Neel in a paper delivered to the 4C's in 1979, no more than 33% of our current T.A.'s will secure full-time positions--but the vast majority of these positions will go to composition specialists. Surely no one here is unaware of such bleak news, but I should guess that too many faculty not directly connected to graduate teaching remain ignorant of the annual MLA Placement Survey and its melancholy statistics. According to the 1978 survey there were in that year "as many 'tenure-track' jobs for specialists in rhetoric and composition alone as for specialists in Old and Middle English, the Renaissance, Restoration and eighteenth century, nineteenth-century British, twentieth-century British, colonial American, nineteenth-century American, twentieth-century American, and literary criticism combined."[1]

The second point follows from the first: if our T.A.'s are to secure any of the few positions advertised in the MLA Job Information List, their competence

to teach composition must be virtually certified by their departments. We already do as much in the way of certification for literature specialists (the dissertation and defense are our instruments) but we should make at least a modest effort to create a structured, consistent, and departmentally recognized teacher training program.

Third, the training program should be a course--not a vague advising program or even an apprenticeship program through which new T.A.s observe passively several experienced composition teachers, but an academic course that is recognized by the university and for which a grade is received. That last point is important, I think, because the transcript grants recognition to the teacher training course almost equal to that given seminars in Milton or Pope. Such status may flatter the teaching training faculty but, more significantly, it places teacher training on the permanent record. (As an aside, I offer this advice to those trying to create graduate-level teacher training courses. If you cannot persuade your department to accept the course for graduate credit, propose this compromise: require the course for first-year T.A.s but allow the department not to grant credit towards the M.A.)

Fourth, department chairs and divisional deans should be encouraged to encourage, in their turn, research in composition <u>within the department's composition courses</u>. Such research and experimentation frequently requires the participation of T.A.s, and such projects make the sharing of pedagogical ideas between full-time and graduate student faculty necessary and inevitable.

Fifth, the department's lecture committee should be urged to invite to campus at least once a year, a guest lecturer in composition. We may hope for more than one lecturer later, but at the moment the composition specialist probably will have to schedule an appearance between visiting deconstructionists. A few years ago a visit to our campus by E. D. Hirsch was highlighted not so much by his evening lecture on semiotics as by his afternoon discussion with our T.A.s

on theories of composition. In fact, a visit by Hirsch may very well stun the literature faculty when they realize that Hirsch is these days, and by choice, a composition specialist.

Sixth, and last, a department competition should be created with a suitable award for the best graduate student teacher. Some departments already give recognition to the best scholarly work produced each year by a graduate student; why not give a least equal recognition to teaching? Ideally, why not apply the standards we apply to ourselves--recognized scholarship and teaching--to our graduate students and award a prize to the best graduate student-teacher?

My six suggestions are based on a number of lessons learned during my tenure for the past eight years as Director of Freshman English at Miami University. While I am happy to say that our faculty did not have to be dragged kicking and screaming to a collective awareness of the necessity for graduate student teacher training, I confess that we still face a negative climate stubbornly reisistant to change. That climate is one which most of us will recognize, and is perhaps only too cruelly described as a collection of negatives: not enough time, not enough money, not enough staff, not enough incoming graduate students. At Miami our academic calendar does not give us time to train our new graduate students with patience and care; our M.A. and Ph.D. programs require of its faculty fewer hours devoted to graduate student supervision than to research and publication; our budget precludes the hiring of additional tenure-track faculty; our number of applications for graduate assistantships continues to decline. These are the primary negatives, and there are a host of minor ones that any of us can readily suggest. But--again--I think the negatives I've just given are representative enough of the climate in which most of us must work that a description of my department's moderately successful attempt to improve that climiate may be of some help.

First, let me share some assumptions on which our Freshman English course and training program are based. A tightly structured Freshman English course suggests

a tightly structured training program. Second, a department in which over ninety per cent of the full-time faculty teach the required freshman course suggests that graduate students are not minions to whom the course is given but virtual colleagues sharing in a common pursuit. Third, a required M.A.-level course in rhetoric suggests that our students must have an understanding of theory which can be complemented by actual classroom teaching.

The Miami Freshman English sequence is a traditional, one-year course in rhetoric, literature, and composition; there are a minimum eight papers assigned each semester, and the paper assignments themselves are required by the policy-making Freshman English committee. But in spite of our standard syllabuses and uniform adoption of a course rhetoric text there is considerable flexibility within a larger and controlling frame. For example, the first semester of the course offers to instructors two syllabuses: one organized by rhetorical modes and one devoted largely, but not entirely, to sentence combining. I like to think that the Miami Program is an example of that advocated by Allan Hollingsworth in his 1977 ADE address: freshman writing courses according to Hollingsworth, "should consist of two or three well-defined, research-based, experienced-based alternative models of the composing process."[2] Again, a variety of approaches within a common, controlling frame. To me, so controlled a course as ours requires a tightly conceived as well as richly informed teacher training program.

Very much like our freshmen who are only high school seniors with a summer tan, our entering M.A. candidates are June students and August teachers; in many ways they are as nervous and apprehensive as the freshmen they teach. I would argue, however, that since the inception of our workshop course we've succeeded, at the very least, in reducing anxiety and, at most, in improving the quality of instruction in the course. We achieve these results through a week-long workshop course offered just before the opening of the August term, taught by the Director of Freshman English, and by a two-semester sequence of group meetings, in-service

workshops, and observations conducted by two full-time members of the faculty who do not hold administrative appointment.

Let me describe the workshop first. The late summer workshop opens with a morning-long session on the nature of the Miami Freshman English program and a discussion of the rights and responsibilities of graduate students who exit in an academic limbo: they are students as well as teachers, but the roles sometimes merge, ususally confuse, and always conflict. The limbo is real enough, but I try as early as the first day to impress upon our new student teachers that they are partners in a common department-wide effort to teach Freshman English with vigor and imagination; they are not equal partners--not yet--but they are partners all the same. This willingness of the director of the course to accept new graduate teachers as partners is crucially important, for it begins to break down those artificial barriers between professor and graduate student so that the graduate student soon learns that the teaching of composition in a large required course is shared equally across the department. Even more importantly, this recognition of partnership signals the relative independence given graduate students in the classroom; they are told, in effect, that they are as responsible for their class as a full-time member of the department.

After a departmentally-sponsored, rather formal luncheon in one of our Georgian dining rooms, the graduate students return to the workshop for an afternoon of grammar instruction. This may seem an odd way to begin actual workshop instruction, but we have found that grammar is a word which is as threatening to our graduate students as to our freshmen, and I say this not to indict our graduate students but to point to a fact we may frequently ignore. That is, most of our graduate students are former English majors who never experienced serious grammatical problems, and therefore are ill-equipped to help students who do have serious problems. The session on grammar is thus designed to introduce the definitions of common grammatical errors and to suggest ways

in which graduate students can help freshman overcome grammatical deficiencies. This last point is important since the Freshman English course does not include, by design, any systematic instruction in grammar.

For the second day of the workshop one of the linguists in the departmment directs a session titled "fundamentals of language structure." Essentially, this session represents a non-technical discussion of syntactic structures, transformational mechanisms, and fundamental grammatical terminology.

By mid-week the workshop turns from the somewhat abstract discussion of the early sessions to more practical matters as both the traditional and the sentence combining syllabuses are presented to the graduate students. I call these sessions less abstract because they involve the techniques of assigning papers--not simply of subjects for papers but of techniques for brainstorming, invention, paper organization, introductory paragraphs, and appropriate and inappropriate thesis statements.

Though the emphasis continues on practicality during the fourth day, instructors are once again changed. The morning session concentrates on a discussion of graduate student goals and graduate student roles and is coordinated by a psychologist employed by the university counseling service. I do not mean to suggest that four days into the workshop our graduate students need therapy; we have found, rather, that however helpful the workshop may be, it cannot banish fear of failure and severe nervousness in those who have never, even for a moment, faced a classroom of students. This session is subtly organized by a professional therapist and has directly contributed to the general mental stability of our first-year Graduate Assistants. In the afternoon one of our two department mentors introduces the students to the evaluation of teaching techniques revealed--or perhaps exposed--by videotaping. The actual videotaping of graduate students is conducted on a voluntary basis during the first and second semesters; the tapes themselves are evaluated by the mentor

in the presence of the graduate student who has been taped. Still later in the afternoon the graduate students meet with the humanities librarians in the main library for what is more than the usual library tour; the emphasis of this ninety-minute session is on curriculum aides offered by the library staff as well as on special services offered freshmen students who seem, more often than not, innocent even of the library's location.

A graduate student who faithfully attended each workshop session of the course three years ago told me that everything and everyone was helpful during the long week of preparation sessions but that "truth" actually appeared on Thursday night; that is, on the evening before the final day of the workshop. Hyperbole, of course, yet not without a truth of its own: for on Thursday evening our new teaching assistants are given eight to ten freshman papers and are asked to grade them and be ready for a discussion of evaluation standards on Friday morning. Without doubt the Friday session has become the most valuable part of our workshop, though its popularity has surprised me. Like many full-time faculty, I had anticipated that sessions devoted to classroom discussion techniques or to the vagaries of office conferences would be the most valuable parts of the workshop, and while such sessions have been helpful, the one most immediately responsive to our teaching assistants' needs is the grading session. Most of our incoming graduate students have little awareness of a C or D paper because their own papers have never received such grades; therefore, not only are they unprepared to grade papers composed entirely of fragments or of papers punctuated solely with semi-colons--and in the left hand margin, too--but they scarcely know where to begin to help students overcome such basic writing handicaps. And if our graduate students are usually good writers themselves they are nevertheless products of an academic environment in which A means good, B means pretty good, and C means failure; they need to be reminded in the grading session that the grading standards of a large writing course are actually more precisely defined than their undergraduate

experience has led them to believe. So the objectives of the session are at least threefold: first, actual practice in analyzing a freshman paper for its content, organization, expression, and mechanics; second, assigning a grade which conforms to the department's grading standards; and, third, suggesting in the concluding comments on the paper and in follow-up sessions in the office or in the campus writing lab, specific ways to overcome composition weaknesses. I have sometimes directed this session alone and sometimes with colleagues, but whether one person or several leads the grading session it is crucially important that the T.A.s be taught to encourage their students. As experienced teachers we know the hostility and suspicion we inspire in our students--and sometimes even in our colleagues, as any in-service workshop for instructors outside English will easily demonstrate. To a considerable degree that hostility is the result of the cryptic correction symbol, the traumatic red ink, the insensitive concluding comment: "no thesis;" "superficial;" "needs work;" and--worst of all--"see me." I will endorse as strongly as possible Bill Irmscher's claim in Teaching Expository Writing that the teacher's "attitude" is the single most important thing needed to improve student writing. A critical but also positive attitude can be demonstrated in the marking and grading of student papers, and it is the conveying of this point--far more than the accurate recording of correction symbols--that simply has to be made in the grading session.

The workshop does not end with the grading session but, rather, with a Friday afternoon discussion by all the workshop participants of something which, for lack of a better title, I call the "profession of English." Away from the classroom and the blackboards covered with definitions of grades, the workshop participants meet in a reception room and over sherry they discuss what appears to be the current state and future prospects of our profession. The full-time faculty has not shown any reluctance to discuss the job market and non-academic careers for the English Ph.D., but the session usually is both relaxed and upbeat. What

begins early in the week as an attempt to welcome our new graduate students as virtual colleagues ends in a frank discussion of where we are now and where we may be several years from now.

I said earlier that a structured freshman composition program should be complemented by a structured training program. My two remaining points on the integration of teaching assistants within the department and on the complementary relationship between a workshop on methods and an academic course on theory can be dealt with briefly.

I have attempted to stress throughout my description of the workshop that we try in various ways to welcome our teaching assistants as virtual colleagues sharing with us a common pursuit, and we continue the integration efforts through a supervisory system called at Miami the Mentor Plan. The Mentor Plan, now it its eighth year, requires that each incoming M.A. candidate be assigned to one of two Department Mentors. The two mentors, whose duties require release time, are the day-to-day immediate supervisors of the Graduate Assistants. On the average, six to eight GAs are guided by each mentor in 90-minute sessions, scheduled every other week, through the considerable complexities of teaching freshman English. The mentors explain upcoming writing assignments, they offer additional grading sessions, they demonstrate how to discuss student writing in class, they explore various ways one can conduct workshops on first paragraphs, drafts, and revision. When there is time the mentors discuss the role of the conference in improving student writing--and when there is both time and imagination, the mentors engage in role playing. The mentors also observe their graduate students at least three times each semester, they review two to three sets of graded freshman papers before they are returned to students, and they file a written evaluation of the graduate student's teaching with the Directors of Freshman English and Graduate Study--with a carbon for the graduate student. Finally, the mentors require that graduate students observe their mentor's freshman English class.

Such observations by the apprentice of the so-called master teacher are valuable in a number of ways: the actual classroom performance by an experienced composition teacher is clearly less artificial than the workshop discussions of techniques; also, the new graduate student can see how much thinking must be done on one's feet when what appeared to be a foolproof preparation turns out to be foolish. And the apprentice may even see the master deflated by the surprises so endemic to the profession: the class plan that seems so promising and is so dull, the question posed by the student with the wrinkled brow--the question to which the only honest answer is, "I don't know."

Finally, complementing our effort to train our graduate students through a workshop and Mentor Plan, a course in rhetoric is required during the first semester of the M.A. year. The course content is mainly historical and theoretical, but discussions of pedagogy are routinely included; the course texts, Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student and Gary Tate's Teaching Composition show the general tendencies. Although a research paper is not now required in the pre-semester workshop course, I look forward to proposing as a first-year requirement that our new graduate students submit at the close of the academic year a seminar-level paper based on the experiences of workshop and classroom as well as on the formal course in rhetoric.

The teacher training program I describe here does not of course guarantee that successful teachers can be produced in a few short weeks, but it does alleviate our new teachers' anxieties and assures the university as a whole that the required composition course is not taught by totally inexperienced instructors. Such a program may seem too structured to some; it is clearly different from the so-called training given most of us. My own training as a Teaching Assistant amounted to a command that so numbed me, I could do nothing but obey: "Here is Baker's Practical Stylist and the Borzoi Reader; now go and teach Freshman English." But if our training program should still seem too structured even when contrasted to

the single imperative that summed up my own training, I should counter that an awareness of a course's standard structure is necessary if one must--as I think we all eventually must--bend that structure to accommodate the needs of a given class or of a newly discovered and potentially exciting teaching strategy.

There are of course weaknesses built into our training program: students may become bewildered by the variety of composition philosophies held by experienced instructors; the implicit given that we learn to teach by watching others teach may not always produce happy results; and our attempt to integrate the teaching assistants into the department through a series of well intentioned but nevertheless subtly threatening evaluation techniques may not produce the results desired. Nevertheless, the training program's value is best typified by our graduate students' endorsement and by some praise given it by WPA evaluators Elaine Maimon and Harry Crosby. In fact the graduate students themselves evaluate the course annually and ask not that it be eliminated but expanded and enriched by the participation of even more full-time members of the department. And, to use a crass, but necessary word, it helps "sell" our graduate students when they leave, as they all eventually do, the workshop, the Georgian dining room, the chalk-covered blackboard of correction symbols, the comfortable mentor's office, and the security offered by a required syllabus. The academic world to which some of them will go is not as promising as it once was, but with a professional commitment to graduate student teaching we may show our students that that world still has the potential for creativity, achievement, excitement--and even joy.

NOTES

[1]Richard I. Brod and Jasper P. Neel, "From the Editors," Profession 79 (New York: Modern Language Association, 1979), p. iv.

[2]Allan Hollingsworth, "Beyond Survival," Profession 77 (New York: Modern Language Association, 1977), p. 9.